

## A.V. Suraweera's *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen*

LeRoy ROBINSON

Alankarage Victor Suraweera is Professor of Sinhala and Chairman of the Department of Sinhala, Sri Jayawardenepura University, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

Suraweera, born on October 2, 1930, was the son of a rural family and grew up near the interior town of Gampaha, about twenty-five miles from Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital.

Suraweera attended the Government English school in Gampaha and later graduated from Royal College, Colombo, one of the most prestigious high schools for boys in Sri Lanka. In 1954 he graduated from the University of Peradeniya. In 1957 he was awarded a Master's Degree, and in 1964 a Ph. D., by the same university.

Suraweera has published many scholarly articles and books on Sri Lankan culture and literature. In 1959 his book on the culture of the Anuradhapura Period won a State Award. In 1968 his critical edition of the *Rajavaliya*, a Sinhala classic, won another State Award.

In the 1970s Suraweera received an Asia Foundation Grant and for one year participated in the creative writing program at the University of Iowa, and, on a Commonwealth Fellowship, he spent a year at the University of Kent, Canterbury, U. K., where he did research on the sociology of literature.

Suraweera has published five novels and four volumes of

short stories. In 1980 his last novel *Sada Melesa Pura Derana* (Thus the City Was Built on Earth) won a State Award. Two of his collections of short stories have also won State Awards, and one of them was prescribed as a textbook for Sinhala in the G. C. E. Advanced Level. He has also published three books of stories for children. He has translated Aristotle's *Poetics* into Sinhala.

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"An Introduction to the Stories of A. V. Suraweera" (July 1982), "A. V. Suraweera's 'The Faithful Wife'" (December 1982), "An Interview with A. V. Suraweera on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka" (December 1983, June 1984, December 1984), and "A. V. Suraweera's *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen*" (March 1986) introduced Alankarage Victor Suraweera to an academic audience in Japan.

This introduction continues with the publication in English of further sections of Suraweera's college novel of 1977, *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen* (Tread Softly, Lest the Branch Break), translated from the original Sinhala by Vijita Fernando, and edited by Le Roy Robinson.<sup>1)</sup>

In "An Interview with A. V. Suraweera on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka" (June 1984), Suraweera says that his story deals with the life of a university campus that is in turmoil. "The powers of the university's president are limited; he is not able to take a decision of his own. The deans, professors, lecturers, student counsellors, marshalls—all are puppets more or less. Students are distracted by their leaders, who, in turn, are controlled by various political parties from outside the campus... On the whole, the academic atmosphere expected of a university is lacking. There is a general deterioration of discipline. Certain

members of the faculty are involved in politics or personal rivalries...Life in the university goes on amidst all this tension. The best way of survival is to tread softly; otherwise, the whole thing would tumble down."

Wimal Dissanayake, presently Professor of Mass Communication and Associate Director for Asian Studies, East-West Center, Hawaii, reviewed *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen* in the *Ceylon Observer*, September 11, 1977. He says that the novel "recreates the true nature of campus life with a remarkable degree of understanding and discernment." He says, "The university president is hemmed in by politicians, higher authorities, students, minor staff, his own colleagues. He struggles against great odds to discharge his duties impartially and responsibly." Dissanayake describes some of the professors in the novel: One is "shrewd, scheming and perfidious." Another is "ostentatious and status-seeking." A third is "a sincere teacher with an honest compunction."

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Until the implementation of the University of Ceylon Act No. 1 (1972) there were four public universities in Sri Lanka: The University of Peradeniya, The University of Colombo, Vidyalyanka University, and Vidyodaya University. The latter is the setting of *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen*. (Vidyodaya University is now Sri Jayawardenapura University.) The University of Ceylon Act of 1972 created one university, the four above-named universities becoming branches of the one university. The Minister of Education was responsible for the administration of the university. The head of the university was the Vice Chancellor, who controlled all four campuses. The head of each campus was the

President. (In 1978 each campus became an independent university again.)

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*Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen*

President Wickrama Baladasa<sup>2)</sup> could see the daily deterioration in campus affairs. More than once he contemplated leaving his position. As he solved one problem, another loomed up. Each problem seemed graver than the previous one. "Was there to be no end of it?" he wondered in despair at times. With what hopes he had taken over this job. Within the campus there should be a suitable environment for academic pursuits. There should be good teacher-student relations.

There was a building plan to be considered. But all his time went on useless things. He did not have a minute to spare, not even for things that really mattered for the progress of the campus. Several times he had suggested to his wife that he give up this administrative post and get back to academic pursuits. But not for a minute did she even consider that. She was never prepared to understand the terrible pain and unrest of mind he had been suffering from the day he took over this job.

President Baladasa's wife said: "What a silly thing to even think about. How could you face your friends? And another thing, these messes are not only here. Look at any campus, or for that matter any government department or corporation. Everywhere it's the same. I think Vidyodaya is ten times better than some places."

Thinking about it, the President felt there was some truth in what his wife said. There were greater messes in other campuses. But he would never be able to do here any of the things he had

always wanted to do.

The morning of June 28, 1975<sup>3)</sup>, Dr. Baladasa came down the steps of his house with a heavy load of documents. The official car wouldn't come until 8:30, but he was down even before 8:00, ready to leave. It was as if some great force compelled him.

Before he left home in the mornings, he was in the habit of walking about his garden, looking at his flowers and vegetables. He got a great deal of satisfaction from this. The young luscious banana trees bending toward him were like young country women heavy with child. The chilli plants dotted with tender white flowers reminded him of Ananda Rajakaruna's verses about the star-scattered blue sky<sup>4)</sup>. These thoughts gave him the feeling that at least for the next few hours his thoughts would be clean and good.

Dr. Baladasa remembered earlier years. His students' growing minds, their intelligence, their critical faculties, had given him the same kind of satisfaction that he got from his plants. But that was all so long ago. That body of students had been replaced by the students of the present day, parroting their lectures and their notes on the one hand, and their political gurus on the other. They had no faculties of criticism or analysis, these students. Their enthusiasms were not academic. Everyone had the desire to get a good job after graduating. *That* seemed to be their only enthusiasm. But the president knew full well that even the chances of getting some sort of a job were daily getting slimmer.

Baladasa also remembered the pleasure and satisfaction he first had had from the day he married. He remembered those days as if it were only yesterday. But as his administrative

duties increased those pleasures ceased. Today all that his wife wanted was to make him go higher and higher so that she could shine in his glory. She did not try to understand his problems. To her they were problems of the campus. She sometime grumbled when he brought his files home. How his wife had pleaded to move into the official residence when he became President. He had resisted. He was glad he had had the courage to do that.

Dr. Baladasa had had a sleepless night. He was feeling extra tired and listless this morning. He had brought home papers on which a quick decision was necessary. But he hadn't been able to go through some of them till way past midnight. And, as he thought about the decisions he had been able to take, he wondered whether he had acted right. They were not independent decisions. When she saw him wavering this way and that, his wife had made suggestions. At first he had felt her decisions were eminently suitable, but later, lying in bed, he felt there were other sides to the problems. Now he felt all that time he had spent without sleep had been in vain.

Baladasa knew Dr. Getamanna's application for promotion needed wise thinking and an impartial decision. Getamanna was a kind of snake in the grass. It would be wise to keep Getamanna on his side. But in trying to please Getamanna how many more suitable people would be displeased? He should postpone the decision. Once again he decided never to be unjust to anyone, to always be fair and just and let wise counsel prevail.

The president then thought of Caldera, the Dean of the Faculty of Arts. That fellow had started going to meet the Vice Chancellor at Senate House<sup>5)</sup>, currying favor. What bomb *he* was about to explode one never knew.

Problems. Endless problems!

His wife often nagged him to take an afternoon off and stay at home. But even one hour away from the office meant that his papers piled up. He was not a man to run away from his duties, was he? He would always face them bravely. Then he would win everyone's praise.

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The Hillman stopped near the porch with a clattering sound. Though Dr. Baladasa knew the car was old that rattling sound disturbed him. He thought of the Benz that had been the official car earlier. That was now at Senate House. For the use of higher officials. The result of trying to win the good will of the students.

Neither the students nor the officers in the Senate House had been able to bear seeing the former president in the Benz. What was the use of Benz cars for those on the road to socialism? That former president had tried to banish the image of the capitalist class from the campus. He had sacrificed the Benz. Now President Baladasa had to pay for the sins of his predecessor and travel in this rickety old vehicle.

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Solis, the driver, greeted Baladasa and his wife. He showed his betel-stained teeth and bent in two as usual.

"Solis, any trouble in the campus?"

Solis always said no to this customary question. Even when there was trouble he didn't want to disturb his boss. And today Madame was also there. No point in saying anything.

Dr. Baladasa did not like the way Solis said no. But he

didn't want to ask him anything more in front of his wife. He got in the car and sat with his head awlirl with problems. He felt there was something amiss. Why did he feel so disturbed? He should have listened to his wife and taken the day off. But then his papers would pile up on his desk. He did not know at what moment he might get a call from the Vice Chancellor or the Ministry. If he was not there to provide answers to their questions, it would be a great loss to the campus. And what would they think of him?

On other days he met the milk man, the usual good omen, but today there was a deserted air about the place. After a short distance an old woman with an empty pot crossed the road—a bad omen disturbing his mind even more. Baladasa thought he did not believe in omens and such things, but he noticed these as if by instinct<sup>6)</sup>. Something seemed to whisper to him that there was danger in the offing. He wondered whether he had forgotten anything. He stretched his hand to the rear seat to check his diary. It was not there. "Solis, damn it! I have forgotten my diary. We'll have to go back and get it. Real nuisance." Dr. Baladasa felt comforted. Whatever bad omen there was would now disappear.

His wife brought the diary. He turned to June 28. At 9:30 he had a Financial Committee meeting. Too busy for that. He had to call the Ministry Secretary about the scholarships. At 10:00 the students welfare discussion. That was a big job with a lot of demands. And a discussion with Professor Paranawadiya. That was not important either. Meetings, problems. Endless problems!

He argued with himself that if he were to attend to students welfare himself fully half the problems that had surfaced would



be solved.

As for Professor Paranawadiya, he was absorbed only in academic pursuits. But the students always had some respect for him. That was why he had been appointed as Senior Counsellor for students. Dr. Baladasa had had trouble in persuading him to accept the position. Getamanna and a few others had been trying hard to get it because of the extra pay. But Baladasa had decided Paranawadiya was the man most acceptable to both faculty and students. And Paranawadiya's advice and help as a senior teacher would be helpful to the president too. The only snag was that, apart from academic and research work, Paranawadiya did not trouble himself much about student activities. But there was no doubt he would even lay down his life for students studying Eastern philosophy.

The president remembered that, after Paranawadiya had taken over as senior student counsellor, he had organized the New Study Circle. This action had opened many eyes. Another clever move by Paranawadiya was his strategy of getting Janadasa, the president of the Student Union, to take the lead in the Circle. Janadasa could sway many students who were not committed to one side or other in campus disputes. The president had decided to give every encouragement to develop and expand the New Study Circle.

Into the president's mind came an image of Professor Paranawadiya—short and stout, cigar between his lips, head inclined to one side, his heavy firm tread, his black umbrella in one hand, his battered leather bag in the other, a hesitant smile coming through the full face and thick lips.

President Baladasa had visited Paranawadiya six months back to speak to him of this appointment as senior counsellor.

"Professor, you must accept this somehow. You are doing me a special personal favor." At these words, Paranawadiya's face had crumpled.

"No," said Paranawadiya. "I won't have any time for my research if I get involved in these extra-curricular activities. No, I don't want this. Why can't you get hold of one of our younger teachers? They are clever at these things. And the other thing is, as things are I don't think any good will come out of counselling."

"But you must think of the students also," President Baladasa had said. "We can't only think of our work. The important thing is the students like you. No young lecturer can do this. It was the Vice Chancellor who proposed your name..." Baladasa had had to invent quite a few lies to make Parana wadiya agree. "All right," he said. "If you insist on it so much I'll think about it. Give me a little more time and then I'll let you know."

The president knew of Paranawadiya's financial problems. That was why he had not refused the president's offer straight-away. The president had even gone to the extent of calling Paranawadiya's wife. Actually, it was because of his wife's entreaties that Paranawadiya took on the job and not because he wanted to.

And Paranawadiya often grumbled about his time being wasted. "No one, not even God Visvakarma<sup>7)</sup>, can do any good within this framework. These students are too politically ripened. I mean they are immature."

President Baladasa felt that was the case not only with the students but with everybody in the university. He smiled to himself, thinking it would not suit his position to say anything

of the sort aloud.

There was no end to problems. Problems that needed decisions. Problems that didn't need decisions. Problems that needed thinking about. Problems that didn't need thinking about. Where could he start? That was the next problem.

His mind, unable to decide where to start, quietly withdrew to the recreation room at the University of Pennsylvania, where he had engaged in research nine years before. The time he had spent there, the cool climate, all these feelings knotted inside him now and gave him a feeling of relief. That pleasureable feeling made him hover between dozing and sleeping. He himself could not say how long he stayed in that state of mind.

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As the Hillman braked hard on High Level Road and turned into the campus he came down to earth as if he had dropped from heaven to the world below. He wiped his eyes and looked around. He had the curious knack of being able to decide what sort of a day it would be inside the campus at Wijerama Junction. This was the result of his sixteen-year-long association with the university. He was not a believer in the occult as his wife was, but he had been surprised and bewildered by this strange faculty and had discussed it several times over with friends.

He decided this would be a day even more full of confusion and trouble than there had been recently when he saw some students in little groups dotted here and there and the way some other students were coming towards the road from the campus.

The breeze blowing through the car windows was not enough to calm his ruffled perspiring body. He had had a restless night. That was why he was so tired.

Solis said: "Sir, election activity all along the road. There were some fights last night. I don't know why they can't do whatever they have to and get back..."

It was only when Solis spoke that Baladasa saw the slogans written on the surface of the road. Signs of stars, hands, elephants. The car was going too fast for him to read the words. How wrong it was that election propaganda had begun even before the diploma examination.

Over the main entrance to the campus there were banners of green, blue and red. Big banners with huge letters on them. Blackboards from lecture rooms, sheets of asbestos, pieces of wood were all along the road, slogans staring out of them.

"Victory to the United Socialist Front for Students' Rights!"

"Victory to the Progressive Students' Society!"

"Leadership to the Sri Lanka Samajawadi Balavegaya!"<sup>8)</sup>

"Victory to us—nuts to you, Socialist Front!"

The canvassing usually would have been after examinations were handed in. But whenever it was he had not been able to even think of giving permission for this type of canvassing and propaganda. He had thought it would be unsuitable to give permission but that if it came to a push he would give permission. Only then.

Baladasa thought: "Things were not good. Other campuses allowed their students to do what they wanted and shut their eyes. It's not possible for me only to lay down the law. There's only one thing for me to do. Let them dance to any tune they like. What do I care?"

Passers-by stopped and stared at the scene inside the campus. Beyond, at the police station, there was a police vehicle parked. Baladasa decided to inform the police if things got out of hand.

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The students were in small groups. Some were running about excitedly, talking heatedly. Baladasa deduced some confusion had prevailed just a little earlier. He knew how to act in such a situation. He looked at the students. He smiled at them. As usual. As soon as the car stopped, he hurried to his office.

His secretary informed him several groups of students had come to see him. Chief Marshall Peiris had been to see him several times. Dr. Getamanna had phoned him. "Sir, shall I tell Dr. Getamanna you are here?" "No," he said curtly.

He saw two visitors peering into the room rather shyly and then turning away.

"These wretches won't give me any peace to even glance at the newspapers," he said to himself. He knew the daily papers would pile up on his desk till he glanced through them some time in the day. He must read at least the headlines. There may be some report about the campus in them. Who knows what a load of rot there could be about him. It was part of his duty to be aware of what publicity there was about Vidyodaya and about higher education and about national and international news. Whatever work he had, he must not neglect that duty.

He finished the *Daily News*<sup>(10)</sup>. He took up the *Lankadipa*<sup>(11)</sup>. EDUCATION MINISTER LEAVES FOR JAPAN. Oh, world tours for them, and we, we, are hemmed in on all sides, like tethered buffaloes...STUDENT DISCIPLINE DETERIORATES. He wiped his eyes and read the headline again. He started reading the rest of the news story with enthusiasm. "Student discipline in the universities has deteriorated because of the fault of the administrators. They are not interested in student welfare.

All they want is to remain in positions of power." The newspaper quoted Venerable Pallanthara Utthamwansa Thero, an elderly monk. Baladasa flung the newspaper aside angrily: "Mad men. Lunatics. They are there like frogs in the well. Without finding out the truth, they are trying to be heroes." Wondering what smut would be in its front page lead story, he took up the *Atta*.<sup>12)</sup>

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The two men who had peered through the door earlier were now standing in front of the President. "Sir, we have come from Mirisgonia to meet you. This is the father of the girl Karunawathie, who is in some trouble. I am the Principal of the school there."

"Yes, sir. Ayubowan<sup>13)</sup>. She is my child. We are respectable people in that area."

The pain on those tired faces evoked a feeling of compassion in Baladasa. "Sit down," he said. "Karunawathie? Why, what is it? He could not concentrate, as even now his mind was full of the story on student indiscipline."

"Karunawathie Madakumbura<sup>14)</sup>. The girl who has swallowed some poison. You wrote about it to us. The girl is in the hospital."

"Right, right," the president said. He put a mask of concern on his face. "Sit down," he said again, stretching his hand towards the chairs in front of his desk. For many years he had learnt to listen to problems of students, officials, others, with equanimity. There was nothing special in this. He rang the bell and got the file on Karunawathie. A photograph of her was attached to the papers. He didn't need much time to look at the

photograph to refresh his memory about the incident.

Karunawathie Madakumbura, a first year student, dark in complexion, wearing miniskirts, an exhibition piece on the campus. One night as he went up the steps of Gnanaswara Building<sup>15)</sup>, he saw a few couples nestling close together. In the dim half light he had recognized Karunawathie. The boy with her was named Wanasinghe, the Secretary of the Students' Union. The boy's name was not mentioned in the records, but he was the fellow she had had an affair with for some time.

The president did not probe into such matters. He believed in the protection of human rights. He believed the President had no right to probe into the private lives of students. The students argued the administrators should probe into more serious student affairs, their accomodation problems, their bank loans, jobs for graduates, student body elections, etc., etc.

Two weeks after that night on the steps, Peiris, the chief marshall, had burst into the president's room as if the world had dropped on his head. "Sir, we should go home, not work in this place. Can we shut our eyes and ears when such things are happening! We also have children. These children have been sent here by parents who have the same feelings we do." Peiris, as usual, went on and on.

"What has happened, Mr. Peiris? Can't you tell me briefly? Why this confusion? Be rational, man. Calm yourself."

"Sir, I am reluctant even to talk about it. My whole body is trembling. From that time on I have been sweating." Peiris held out an English newspaper with the tips of his fingers as if he were handling something dirty. He opened it. "This was on the corridor wall in the Finance Section, sir. See? This is evidence of a rape incident. The poor girl!"

The torn and tattered newspaper had a soiled spot that screamed a painful message far better than words. President Baladasa shivered involuntarily and looked away. The girl had not been raped.

"We are also parents, sir," Peiris said. "That's why I can't bear these things. Even the gods won't look at these, sir."

"Do you know who is responsible?"

"I didn't catch him red-handed, sir," Peiris said. "This happened last night. Some clues. I can find out. I will find out. Evidence."

The president needed a few moments to decide what to say or do. He shut his eyes. He puckered his brow. He thought for a few minutes. "How can we find out, Mr. Peiris? Also, what is the use of trying to find out in the middle of all these problems? Does Professor Paranawadiya know about this?"

"No, sir, I didn't tell that gentleman. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. Don't you know he is like a child in these matters?"

"Good," said the president. "Let's not broadcast this. It won't do us any good. And, after all, what is the earthly use of digging into these things?"

Peiris had already known he would get this decision. He left the room with a lighter heart. He clutched the disgusting newspaper.

From time to time that stain had crept into President Baladasa's mind. Every time it did he trembled with disgust. He should act with great firmness. But every time a problem cropped up and he had to face the student's threats, all his decisiveness came to nothing.

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The school principal now in front of President Baladasa was talking as if the university were like a village school. It was obvious from his talk and his ideas that he belonged to a previous century. As for Karunawathie's father, he was a helpless old man for whom the president felt enormous compassion.

But now, the president thought, everything had happened and was finished. It was by the slimmest chance, but Karunawathie's life had been saved. The infant in her womb was doing well. Who could say whether when it grew up it too would be a heartless rascal like these university students? Wasn't it best that it be destroyed? The old man could be advised to do so, but would the principal allow it? If such an idea were to come out of the president's mouth it would set the country aflame. Tomorrow's newspapers would have banner headlines: HUMAN RIGHTS...RESPECT FOR HUMAN LIFE... Do not interfere with other people's affairs.

Dr. Baladasa remembered at the height of this scandal he had asked the women's hostel warden to bring Karunawathie to him. They had spoken with her for a long time, but she would not divulge the name of her lover. He remembered with anger the wasted effort of trying to explain to her if she gave his name legal action could be taken.

Now the president said to the two men: "There is no point in getting excited about this. If Karunawathie would only tell us who wronged her we could act legally. But she is silent."

Her father explained: "She is a stubborn thing. It is impossible to get a word from her."

"I am very sorry," the president said. "As things are, there is nothing I can do."

The principal began to talk of the law: "That's not good

enough, sir. There must be some justice. Some responsibility for the child."

Dr. Baladasa saw one sentence in the file that gave him a little relief. The pregnancy was reported as five months. The girl had entered the university only four months earlier. It could be the doctor was wrong, but optimum use of this medical error could be made. The president was pleased with his shrewdness and presence of mind. He spoke next with an air of confidence worthy of an administrator.

"There is no need for you to shout," he said to the principal. "Look at this medical report. The girl has been in the university only four months. The doctor certified she is more than five months pregnant. So what are we to do? This happened at home before she entered the university."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed the father. "What a disgusting accusation! We brought up our child like our eyes. Which doctor can open his mouth and say this happened while she was with us? I am sure this shameless thing happened after she came to this place." The father, now on his feet, cursed in every direction.

The president began to dial the telephone. He spoke into the dead receiver in English to avoid listening to the old man's harangue.

Finally, the president said, "We are very sorry. But what can we do? There's nothing to be done. Better take her home from the hospital and bring her back here whenever you like."

"Oh, dear!" said the father. "With what difficulty we sent her here! With what hopes for the future! No girl has come to the university from our community before. Not even from the whole district. That is why I wanted her to come. Whatever

it cost us. For these four months I have pawned my wife's two gold bangles. And the pair of buffaloes that were as precious to me as my life. What a shame!"

President Baladasa wanted to say the trouble was most young people forgot everything when they came here. But he said nothing. He did not want to prolong this interview.

Both men continued to shout, both talking at once.

The president did not listen. He stood up. He was unable to bear the emotion-charged harangue, the accusations, the recriminations. "Shall we now end this?" he said. "I'm sorry, but I have a meeting to attend."

He heard: "How can you avoid a situation like this? We always thought this was a place where children were taught. That is why we sent our child here. But now it seems this is some kind of a market place where good for nothing fellows can do as they will, and teachers turn a blind eye."

It was quite clear to President Baladasa he would not be able to get rid of these two men easily. He thought of telephoning the Senior Student Counsellor and asking him to explain things further to them. But even as he stretched his hand towards the telephone he changed his mind. He knew the interview might become more and more prolonged. And if Paranawadiya got worked up, fresh problems would crop up.

In the midst of all the accusations, Dr. Baladasa got up and left the room. He could listen no longer. What a lot of other work he had. He returned to his office only when he heard from his peon the visitors had left.

The president was glad to get rid of this nuisance, but Karunawathie's father's words, his helpless posture, kept returning to his mind, piercing him as if with a poisoned dart.

Baladasa began turning over the file again, especially looking at some disciplinary reports. What a good thing he had introduced this method of keeping the personal reports on the students by the marshalls. He began to read them again.

February 28 : Four people were with Madakumbura Karunawathie, a fresher<sup>16)</sup>. She was crying, covering her face. She spoke shyly. One student had tried to pull her by her skirt, and she had shouted at him. When she did this another group threatened her and pulled her and squeezed her, she reported. She had wanted to go home, but, after being advised, she had been taken back to her hostel. What a pity to rag innocent girls like this !

March 12 : There was some commotion in the common room at 5:30. A fight had broken out between Janadasa and Wanasinghe. Janadasa accused Wanasinghe of having taken Karunawathie by force to the Students' Union office a few days earlier. The fight broke out after an exchange of words. When I arrived, there were more words. Janadasa's shirt was torn. "We are student leaders," Janadasa was saying to Wanasinghe. "Is it proper for you to do such disgusting acts? You are a disgrace to the Students' Union." Wanasinghe retorted : "That's my business. Just because we are in the Union it doesn't mean we have attained perfection. What is it to you if I get friendly with a girl? If you want, tell me, I'll find a girl for you too . . ." When I stepped in, the incident frittered away.

March 18 : Three couples were loitering at the rear of Lenin Hall<sup>17)</sup>. It was half an hour after the end of "Parasathumal"<sup>18)</sup>. They were Saparamadu, Karunawathie and Wanasinghe. I asked them to leave so that the hall could be shut. Wanasinghe, Secretary of the Students' Union, spoke in bad language. He scolded us. It was not certain whether the girls were there of their own free will or were being kept by force. But none of them complained. I was able to plead with them, and closed the hall up.

April 11 : Karunawathie and five others remained in the girls' hostel on the third day after the holidays began. Though officials of

the Union were permitted to stay, we questioned Karunawathie and Harriet Silva as to why they were staying. Wanasinghe and Edirisuriya shouted at us it was none of our business. They attended the lectures held daily from five in the evening.

May 13 : This is the second day of the strike. Six students attended the Geography lecture. Dr. Weerasinghe informed me a crowd of students had forced themselves into the lecture hall. They shouted and hooted and put an end to the lecture. In that crowd were Ranaweera, Sirisoma, Harriet Silva and Karunawathie.

May 15 : All those who spoke at the end of the strike blamed the government, the Minister of Education, the Vice Chancellor, the Campus President, in obscene language. One of them was Karunawathie. What a change from the innocent girl of a few months' back!

June 1 : I was informed a student in the women's hostel was ill about 10:00 p. m. Karunawathie was crying. She complained of a stomach ache. On a request from Wanasinghe the jeep was given to take the girl to the Kalubowila Hospital<sup>19)</sup>.

June 8 : Karunawathie had to be taken to the hospital again. Coming back, she was sobbing. But we could not find out why.

June 12 : About 4:45 in the evening Karunawathie was sobbing with her head on a desk in Room 13<sup>20)</sup>. She did not answer when I inquired what was the trouble. I advised her to go to the hostel. She asked me to lend her five rupees. I gave her the three rupees I had. She wiped her tears and went to the hostel. There was an air of frustration on her face. Wanasinghe does not pay her any attention now. Perhaps that was why she was crying.

President Baladasa had the patience to go through all these entires made by the marshalls carefully. And he was quite satisfied.

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Professor Paranawadiya tried hard, day and night, during the week to collect his scattered notes and get down to writing

his research paper on Buddhist Philosophy and Materialism. He had to complete the paper by July 15 and send it to the University of Toronto's Department of Religious Studies. He spent a number of days closeted in the library reading books and journals. He had to work out the problems that had come up after he sifted through the materials. He had to identify his main line of reasoning.

Sometimes in the library he bent his head down over his reading material like a recluse in a trance. He fell into thought trying to sift and identify the facts that would prove his argument. Sometimes he looked up, startled at the emptiness and loneliness of the library. He felt as if he had strayed into a deserted region. He was the only one in the library. At other times there were at least a few research workers and students. Their numbers were decreasing though! After all, this was the place where the knowledge and learning of the university were concentrated. A university education can never be complete without reading others' views, considering them critically, assessing them. He had spoken to students about the importance of doing this countless times.

Some time back a fortnightly discussion of the New Study Circle had been planned. Just a handful to participate in the discussion. One day the discussion had centered on notes given out by lecturers and how wrong it was to accept them without question. Views expressed that day had amazed Professor Paranawadiya.

"Sir, most of the books are in English. We don't understand them." "We have no time to read books, sir." "Our lecturer said his notes were enough for us to pass the exam. He said reading too much will confuse us." "Sir, what is the use of

wasting time reading? It's enough if we get the degree. That is also worthless now, anyway."

Everyday in the library Professor Paranawadiya remembered those words. What utter nonsense the old poets had spoken about learning! He left the library angrily. He felt sad for what was happening to the country, to higher education in particular.

He always tried to suppress these feelings of sadness. He tried to think of how he could change the students' apathy to academic work, how he could change their anger and frustration at the collapse of their hopes and aspirations, how he could reach their finest feelings, and turn the university atmosphere into one more academic.

His attitude was not new for him but had been born of long years of association with the social atmosphere and deep study of university society. But during the last few months when he had been closely involved with student affairs as a student counsellor this attitude had intensified.

It was no wonder to Paranawadiya that people like Getamanna were instruments in the university society, part of the system. Though they were men with high academic degrees they had no originality and they were not educated enough to dispel social ills.

He was not surprised such people were popular with the students. Paranawadiya argued a student who stays three to four years in the university was not there long enough to really know the kernel of life in the university. That was why small people of the likes of Getamanna became heroes in the eyes of the students. Paranawadiya's one consolation was a few young lecturers and Janadasa and some other students were involved

in the New Study Circle.

At the beginning Paranawadiya had aimed at limiting the discussions of the Circle to university, educational and academic matters. But on the suggestions of Janadasa and some others he had permitted the discussions to open to social topics and topics of general interest. He was very happy about this. He was glad he had changed his earlier view that a university teacher's role was the advancement and dissemination of knowledge to the intelligent ones among the students and carry on research. The change in his attitude came about after he became counselor. The students had explained matters to him. Those discussions at the New Study Circle gave him a special regard for Janadasa and Reverend Vinitha.

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Now an incident in the Senior Common Room some months before returned to Paranawadiya's mind to harass him. He had gone to the Common Room after several weeks. A number of lecturers were seated in easy chairs around the center table. They were laughing loudly. Paranawadiya knew they were talking trivia. He tried to sidestep the group.

"Come, come, Professor," called out Wijesuriya from the other end of the room. Thankfully Paranawadiya could dodge the group at the table. "Haven't seen you for a long time," said Professor Wijesuriya, who then asked casually, "Why are you looking so thin?" "Wije," Paranawadiya said, "I've been invited to send an article to a journal in Toronto. I've been busy with it all this time." Without an invitation from his friend, Paranawadiya described his research in detail. He wouldn't have done so if there had been others around to listen. He



knew that Wijesuriya was keen on research. One of the few who were. Listening carefully, Wijesuriya quietly repeated the proposed title of the paper : "Buddhist Philosophy and Materialism." Paranawadiya asked, "Why, is there something wrong with my title?"

"No, Parana. I was just wondering what the use of so much work on subjects like this is. You break rest, kill yourself, and write. How many will read a subject like this? How many people will it benefit? That's the question."

Paranawadiya's innocent face was engulfed by a dark cloud. He twisted in his chair. He turned his eyes to the ceiling as if he could not bear to listen to these words.

Wijesuriya went on: "Parana, I'm serious. True, you get some kind of satisfaction. But really what is the use? Now, why can't you write on something like Buddhist Philosophy and Development, or Buddhism and Housing, or Buddhist Philosophy and Family Planning, or, say, Buddhism and Intoxication. I remember it was you who said there was an Arhat who drank liquor<sup>22</sup>). Write some articles like that and everyone will talk about you. Newspaper reporters will run after you. And the government will know there is a man called Paranawadiya."

Paranawadiya did not know what to say. He continued to look at the ceiling.

Professor Kularatne came in and sat down with them. He inquired about the New Study Circle. Paranawadiya repeated Wijesuriya's comments to Kularatne. Kularatne was a mathematician. He had returned recently after serving for several years in universities in the United States and France. Kularatne lighted his pipe.

"In my discipline," he said, "if I start any research project,

I think of its quality not of what use it will be. I only think of going to the depths of the research. The world should know how to make use of my investigation. Most research may not have any direct relevance to life. But there is no argument that man's intelligence is developing. That is vital to the country. But nothing should be directed to cause harm. Also, research that has taken many years might in the end prove quite useless. But the fault is not with the researchers. Do we starve because everything we eat and drink does not remain in our stomachs? No."

Wijesuriya questioned: "Why waste your time and energy on something that will be of no use?" Kularatne responded: "That's not a question to ask. I think the educated people in Sri Lanka have confused research and development. Mostly the people in the arts are the ones who have got confused. When the temporary economic value of these subjects begins to diminish, then they begin to look for their uses. This happened when politics got hinged to higher education. The politicians exploit history and literature and culture. They don't even know these subjects properly. Fortunately they are still a little too scared to talk of our disciplines." Kularatne paused. Then he asked: "What do you think, Professor Paranawadiya?"

Paranawadiya said, "It's wrong to think language, history, literature, philosophy, the humanities, the arts, are useless."

Wijesuriya winked at Kularatne. He smiled a cynical smile as if this view were a ridiculous one.

Kularatne responded: "Quite true. Physical development alone is not enough. Man's intellect must also develop. It is for this literature, art, philosophy, history, are important. But we are at fault. Each of us thinks his own discipline is the most

important, the best. There's nothing like that, O. K.? Each subject is as important as the other." Kularatne spoke as if explaining a lesson to Wijesuriya.

Wijesuriya laughed, trying to ease himself out of an embarrassing situation. "Each lover thinks his beloved is the most beautiful in all three worlds." Kularatne countered: "The fault is that state doesn't last long." Wijesuriya responded halfheartedly: "Still, I believe whatever research we do must be of some use, of some relevance to the people."

"Useful," said Kularatne, "is also a word that can be interpreted in many ways." He paused. "Still, I know what is in Wije's innermost heart. Wije looks at everything from the financial angle. In some countries people do such research on a contract basis. Let's say a pharmaceutical firm wants to manufacture a pill that will sell well—for instance, a birth control pill. A qualified professor or scientist can undertake to manufacture such a pill for a fee of thousands of dollars."

"Quite right," said Paranawadiya. "It's because of this attitude of measuring scholarship by money that the scholarship in the arts is deteriorating in our country. Especially music and literature. You know the ancients believed the man deprived of arts was very much like an animal. Minus the tail and horns."

Kularatne stretched his diary out to Paranawadiya. "That's a fine saying. Please write it down for me." Professor Wijesuriya again smiled cynically.

Paranawadiya remembered the reading he was doing in the library. He looked at his watch and stood up. "Excuse me, I would love to listen to some more, but there's some work I have to finish. Not paid research though!" Paranawadiya tried to forget these arguments. But somewhere in the recesses of his

mind Wijesuriya's words were coiled in a corner and rose every now and then like a snake showing its head.

\* \* \* \* \*

On June 28th at dawn Professor Paranawadiya started writing the article he couldn't start the previous evening. He rose at 4:30 to the sound of the alarm clock. On the paper in front of him was the heading: "Buddhist Philosophy and Materialism."

As Paranawadiya wrote, the words of Wijesuriya kept stealing into his mind. Development and Buddhist Philosophy. He could write an article on that, too, but he would have to collect facts for that. But all this time he had collected facts, arranged them in his mind, and mulled over them, facts on materialism. But apparently there was no use for them. Could there be some truth in what Wijesuriya said? Could Wijesuriya be a man who had comprehended the deeper meaning of life more than he had? Paranawadiya felt there was no use in research done by those who did not have worldly inclinations. Was he breaking rest for the sake of the kind of people who say: "We don't understand this English" or "We have no time to read books"?

It's true, Paranawadiya thought, the business of a university was the advancement of knowledge and the distribution of that knowledge to the world. But should that wisdom be only for the wise? Wouldn't it be more useful if that knowledge could be used for the general well-being of the people? The argument that wisdom is for the wise is not second to the belief that art is for art's sake. A small voice inside Paranawadiya whispered to him that the charge that university dons lived in ivory towers divorced from the realities of everyday life was true. He felt a heavy weight on his heart when he realized that apart from

thinking of what he should do in the future his paper was still where he had begun it that morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

After Paranawadiya had taken over the duties of student counsellor a greater part of his time had been spent just for that duty. What he felt sorry about was he hadn't been able to find even a small group of people who would understand the students' problems. Reverend Vinitha and Janadasa and a few others had realized the importance of acting responsibly. That was a great consolation. But there were only a handful of such responsible students within the campus. Most students were part of the herd, running where others led. But he shouldn't lose heart. Rather, he should give new life and momentum to his activities.

Paranawadiya remembered a saying of Sir Nicholas Attygalle, once the second Vice Chancellor of the university. "Sri Lankan trade unionists' efforts are all bent on doing the least work or no work at all and getting the highest salary." Now students who model themselves on these unionists will advocate the least study for the best marks and then they will want the best jobs, Attygalle had said. These words were coming true, Paranawadiya felt. He must not leave room for it.

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Mrs. Paranawadiya came in with a cup of tea. She stared at the paper in front of her husband. Only the title was scribbled in. She saw plenty of cigar ash sprinkled around. "I was waiting till you came out. All this time! What are you scribbling? Since last night! It's not good for you to break rest so much.

Have you forgotten what the doctor said?"

"What's the time?" He crumpled up his paper and dropped it into the wastebasket. "Close on 8:00." "What? 8:00? I didn't realize the time had flown. I have a lot of work today. I won't be able to finish this paper today."

There were plenty of things Paranawadiya had to do before breakfast. It was very important he exercised even for only fifteen minutes. If he didn't lie on the bed and lift his legs up and down systematically, as the doctor had ordered him to do, his stomach filled with gas and became a dead weight after he walked a few steps. However late he was he had to go through the routine of exercises.

As Paranawadiya finished his breakfast a telephone call came from Dr. Getamanna, who started a long account of the disturbed state of the campus that day. He also said something about the residence halls. Paranawadiya had no desire to listen to this harangue. Just to listen to Getamanna's boasts took too long. "Dr. Getamanna," he said, "I'm coming to the campus now. We'll talk then." He replaced the receiver. He began to pace up and down. He wondered how he was to finish his research paper.

His wife Saroja noticed the change in Paranawadiya's face. Quickly she asked, "What's happened. What did Dr. Getamanna say?" She added: "I don't know why these young people cannot behave themselves."

"A little trouble," Paranawadiya told her. "They have started the election campaign itself now. How many times I've tried to get out of this counselling job. It's your greed that prevents me. When I take on these things all my work gets left behind."

"Don't get so excited. There are marshalls to look after these things. Why should you get involved in these things?"

What is Mr. Peiris doing? And when you talk to them—as if the students are going to listen. Marshalls. Damn the lot of them!”

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In his office Dr. Paranawadiya flung his leather bag on the table and stood his umbrella in the corner of the room. He switched on the fan. Covered with dust and cobwebs, the fan took some time to struggle to life. There was nothing pleasant about the room, he felt.

He looked at the books topsy turvy on the shelves. The Tripitaka and other Buddhist books mingled with the Koran and the Old and New Testaments, commentaries and critiques on these valuable books. A wealth of books. He was ready to share the knowledge he gained from these books. Then he thought sadly of the students who came to learn at his feet. Each year the number dwindled.

He sighed a long sigh and looked at the dust laden shelves. After him, there would be no one to touch these books. “I am old,” he thought. The books are old. And outdated. He thought again of the paper he was supposed to be writing. What was the use of writing such a paper? Wouldn't it be better to write something on development? Wijesuriya's words were haunting him. Whatever the subject, wasn't it the knowledge one gained from studying that subject the valuable thing? Otherwise, wasn't it more meaningful to direct knowledge toward the benefit of the people?

He opened the envelope on his desk carelessly.

He wanted to visit some universities in India to present a paper on a new concept regarding the Upanishads and to meet

some Brahmins to unravel some problems and to look for certain rare books. He did not doubt such research would result in a new and rare conclusion, fresh light on the subject.

He took out the letter. "We regret that we have to defer your request, as funds have been allocated for a number of topical research studies." Signed: The Research Council. "Topical? What were they? Mine is not topical. Write something on Buddhism and Development. Or Buddhism and Growth of the Abdomen!"

Dr. Paranawadiya sat with his head in his hands, talking to himself.

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As Dr. Getamanna entered the office with a shrewd smile Professor Paranawadiya was still sitting with his head in his hands talking to himself. Instead of the usual intelligent calm face radiating good and innocence, Getamanna saw a pale countenance weary with signs of despair. Getamanna felt a twinge of regret. Maybe someone had carried a tale about him? But Dr. Paranawadiya did not believe in such tales. He must now talk with Paranawadiya. It wouldn't do to be on bad terms with him. "Good morning, sir," Getamanna said respectfully and humbly. Paranawadiya did not look up. He muttered something and pointed to a chair. Getamanna sat up straight, determined to stay quiet until Paranawadiya spoke.

"I'm sorry," Dr. Paranawadiya said. He looked up and wiped his face as if he had just got up from a deep sleep.

"Sir," Getamanna said, "There was trouble this morning. Didn't you hear? Some students tried to hoist banners and Mr. Peiris had prohibited it. Two student factions then fought.



When I came there was a huge rumpus. Four or five of them were hurt. Heads were split. Blood everywhere."

"Hurt?" Paranawadiya was startled. "What? When was this? Where are the students?" He asked this string of questions in distress and pain. His throat was dry and the words didn't come out well. He felt had he been there he would have avoided this. Wasn't there a senior advisor to students to look after their welfare? Even if he were not in that position, it was the duty of every teacher. And he had spent his time trying to write research papers and had not come to the campus. This was the result? Had he come he could have taken steps to prevent this calamity. This was a breach of duty. He blamed himself.

Getamanna watched as Paranawadiya's face seemed to dry up and pale as he watched.

"No, sir," Getamanna said. "It doesn't matter, sir. I was there to look after everything. When I went there and shouted a bit, they calmed down. I took the injured students to Kalubowila Hospital in my own car. I got them treated."

"Were the injuries serious? Did the students return? This is terrible."

Getamanna went on: "I wanted to admit them to hospital. But they didn't want to. So I got them attended to, the injuries I mean, and came back, and I took them to the hostel." Getamanna went on: "Ranasinghe didn't even sight the place. At a time like this they should be there, No?" He was speaking of the other student counsellors.

"So you were there," Paranawadiya said. "Good. Now there are a few students who create trouble. Who are they? We should be a little tough with them."

"I couldn't catch them, sir. I'm sorry, I don't think I can name them."

"All right. We'll see what the President has to say."

The earlier pale look on Paranwadiya's face was now replaced by a fierce appearance. "A great shame," he said. "I must teach a good lesson to the few toughs who are creating trouble here." He growled. He paced up and down the room. He banged the table with his fist.

Getamanna left post haste. He had to tell the students Paranwadiya was out to catch the trouble makers. He had to advise the students to look out.

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Paranawadiya summoned Chief Marshall Peiris.

"See, sir," Peiris said humbly. "I begged them not to create trouble." He showed how he had appealed to the students: "I told them we would talk over anything and solve any problems." Peiris spoke more humbly: "What can I, a lone man, do, sir?"

Dr. Paranawadiya was quite used to these performances. "But Getamanna was there, wasn't he?" Peiris said: "Dr. Getamanna? No, sir, he came after everything was over. That's the way with him always. If Mr. Ranasinghe and I were not there, one or two of the students could have been killed. The Chief Marshall went on: "Aiyo, sir, why have some of these devils come to the university anyway? The girls are the worst. I have never heard such filth. My blood runs cold when I even think of the words they used. What a good thing you were not there, sir. No respect for teachers. None. How can such fellows ever do their studies?"

Paranawadiya spoke with some disgust. "The students are

different now. The country is different. We are responsible for this state of affairs."

Peiris responded: "It's politics that has ruined our country and our universities. Otherwise, earlier, when we spoke to them and explained something was not good, they listened. Now these ruffians don't listen to anything, whether you pat them and appeal to them or whether you strike them. These are the citizens of tomorrow. They will take over the country. That's what I fear most."

Paranawadiya waited while Peiris went on and on. Whenever any problem about students came up, Peiris brought out this same harangue.

They suddenly heard a loud commotion some distance away. Then the noise came closer. Then Wanasinghe and a gang of about fifteen students burst into the room. They started threatening Mr. Peiris. "Sir!" Wanasinghe shouted. "This Peiris is telling you a string of lies. He wasn't even in the campus at that time. We know that for sure. If he was there, he must have been hiding somewhere. And now he is here to give the names of the students he is angry with as if he saw it all. We are not going to stand for that!" A babel of voices, male and female, echoed in the room: "Rascal! Two-face! Pardankaraya!"<sup>23)</sup>

Paranawadiya got up and tried to quiet the students with placatory gestures. "Be calm, children, be calm. Why do you shout in this meaningless manner? Can't you speak like civilized people? Say whatever you have to say quietly so that we can understand what you are saying."

"This is what we want to say, sir. There were no marshalls anywhere near there. So how can this man give you our names?" "Blackleg! Rascal! Double-face!"

"You are mad," Paranawadiya said. "Mr. Peiris didn't come for that. I didn't ask him for any names. This is not a question of punishment. All I want to know is what really happened."

"All right, sir," said Wanasinghe. "Then give us a promise no one will be punished." The others echoed this.

"I don't want to punish anyone. Who said anything about punishment? I asked Mr. Peiris..." Wanasinghe cut him off: "No, sir. That won't do. You must promise. There were over a hundred students there. It would be unfair to punish only a few. We can't let that happen. Anyway, nothing happened that deserves punishment. Don't you know, sir, at election time it's always like this? We must have freedom to do what we want in the university."

"Don't get excited," Paranawadiya said. "This is not a question of punishment I said. These things spoil the good name of the campus. So let's find out how we can prevent these things from happening in the future at least. That's what I'm worried about."

"Let's go, machang!" Wanasinghe said and left the room. The others followed him, screaming: "Jayawewa!<sup>24</sup> Blacklegs, go to hell! Down with Fascism! Victory to the Progressive Students' Union!"

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The old broken down fan was not adequate to cool the sweat that drenched Dr. Paranawadiya's body. The room seemed to sway this way and that. The students' words echoed and re-echoed. "Now see, sir, if their behavior is right," Peiris said. "Have they come here to study or to learn political activity?" The telephone rang incessantly. When he could bear its ringing

no more, Paranawadiya took the receiver into his hand.

"This is the Minister's private secretary. We hear some of our students are being harassed. Our supporters. The Minister wants you to drop the whole thing. Right? O.K."

Dr. Paranawadiya dropped the receiver. He leaned back against the chair. He felt as if there was no life left in his legs or in his body. No life at all.

### Notes

- 1) Vijita Fernando, a graduate of the University of Peradeniya, is a translator and journalist who contributes to Sinhala and English newspapers in Sri Lanka. "The View from the Inside," her review of *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen*, appeared in the *Ceylon Daily News*, June 3, 1977.
- 2) *Ama*=skilled. *Bala*=strength, power. *Dasa*=servant.
- 3) All of the events of this novel take place on June 28, 1975.
- 4) Rajakaruna was an early 20th century Sinhala poet who wrote poetry for children. The poem referred to here is still popular in Sri Lanka.
- 5) Office of the Vice Chancellor. In 1975 all four national university campuses were administered by the Vice Chancellor.
- 6) Sri Lankan intellectuals do not as a rule believe in omens, but in times of trouble some of them tend to rely on them.
- 7) The attendant of Buddhist God Sakra.
- 8) Samajawadi Balavegaya-Socialist Movement.
- 9) A denunciation of the United Socialist Front, which in 1975 leaned toward the United National Party, presently in power in Sri Lanka.
- 10) A popular English language newspaper.
- 11) A general circulation Sinhala newspaper.
- 12) Sinhala newspaper of Sri Lanka Communist Party. *Atta*=truth.
- 13) "May you have long life." Greeting used at any time of day.
- 14) Karunawathie=one who is kind, obliging. Typical name of a rural girl. *Mada*=mud. *Kumbura*=field.
- 15) A building with classrooms ; separated from the administration build-

ing.

- 16) The family name precedes the given name.
- 17) New Arts Theatre, the original name, was changed to Lenin Hall by left-wing students in the early 1970s.
- 18) "Belonging to Others," the name of a Sinhala film.
- 19) A public hospital close to the Vidyodaya campus.
- 20) In Sri Lanka the number 13 is considered unlucky.
- 21) *Vinitha*=well-disciplined.
- 22) Reference to a Jataka story in which Buddha learns that an Arhat drinks liquor, which is then prohibited.
- 23) One who holds the candle or torch for another. A stooge.
- 24) *Jayawewa*=Victory to us. We will win.

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